

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**THE WORKING PEOPLE OF LOWELL
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
MARY BLEWETT/MARTHA MAYO**

**INFORMANT: ROLAND LAROCHELLE
INTERVIEWER: OLGA SPANDAGOS
DATE: DECEMBER 10, 1985**

**O = OLGA
R = ROLAND**

Tape 85.32

O: Okay, my name is Olga Spandagos and I'm here...[tape fades out]. This is December 10, 1985. [Tape fades out] Okay Roland, can you tell me a little bit about where your parents were from?

R: Both my parents are from right here in Lowell, Massachusetts. They were both born here. Oh, I beg your pardon, my mother was born in Worcester, Mass., but they were both born in Massachusetts here.

O: And um, you were born in Lowell? (R: Yes, yes, I was born here) And you were raised here? Uh huh, and what were your parents' ethnic background?

R: They're all French all the way back as far as I...my grandfather, great grandfather, yah.

O: And were your grandparents originally from Canada?

R: They were originally from Canada, yes.

O: I bet your parents were both born and raised here though.

R: Right, yah.

O: And um, can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood you grew up in?

R: Well I grew up in South Lowell. I was born here in Lowell. And then when my mother and father bought a home in 1928 in South Lowell, they moved out there and they ah... So everything was going well until 1931 when my father became ill. Went to the hospital on a Friday evening,

and I was called out of school. On the Monday morning he passed away. He had left my mother with eight children. A week after he was age thirty eight. After he ah, a week after he was buried, my mother had her ninth baby. So ah, we were really up against it, but we still had a home to live in. Several months after my father died, my mother wasn't able to make any more payments on the house. So they took it away from her. So we ah, we packed up and we moved to Lowell. And they ah, my mother found a tenement house which we occupied, three floors. So we lived there for quite awhile.

O: And what occupation did your father have before he died?

R: He was a boilermaker for the Boston and Maine Railroad. He worked out at the car shops at North Billerica.

O: Did your mother work?

R: No she didn't.

O: She had to take care of the family?

R: Oh she had enough. All the children, you know, there wasn't anyone old enough to go to work, you know?

O: Can you tell me what street did you live on when you grew up?

R: Well after we moved to Lowell I lived on Nichols Street here in Lowell. Nichols and Branch. A big tenement house, and it had some French people around there. Well it was in the Notre Dame de Lourdes Parish at the time. That's where the old church use to be, on... Notre Dame de Lourdes had a church on Branch Street, but right in that area, there was alot of French people. And there was Irish people, there was kind of mixed.

O: So it was a mixed neighborhood?

R: Yes.

O: But were those the predominant groups of French and the Irish?

R: Mostly the French around that particular neighborhood, because it was a predominantly French parish.

O: And um, you mentioned you occupied three floors in the house.

R: Yes.

O: Were there any other families living in the tenement that you lived in?

R: Well, there... next door, yes, but they had ... I don't recall whether or not they had three floors or not. But we, you know, because of the number of people in our family we had to have that much room. They allowed us to have three floors and the boys all slept on the top floor, while the girls ... We had five boys and six boys and three girls, and they ah, the girls slept on the second floor.

O: Were you ah, the middle child or youngest, oldest?

R: I was the fourth oldest.

O: Fourth oldest? (R: Yah) And um, your neighborhood, what school did you go to?

R: I went to the Franklin School. It was a little school there on Branch Street, and I was in the fourth grade. And they ah, it was a... I think it only went up to about ... I think it only went up to about the fifth grade at that time. Yah.

O: And what other children did you go to school with?

R: The children I went to school with, they were French and Irish, you know, mostly. Yah.

O: Those were the neighborhood kids.

R: Yes, but they come from short distance around from School Street, and around upper Branch Street. So that the school was right in that particular area.

O: Did the friends you have, were mostly French?

R: Yes, yah.

O: So you didn't really hang out with the Irish kids?

R: Well I was pretty active as a kid playing baseball, you know, in sports, but they ah... Mostly it was a mixture of mostly French and Irish, but mostly French. Yah, mostly French.

O: Well you had mentioned that your grandparents were originally from Canada.

R: Yes.

O: Did your parents speak French at home amongst themselves?

R: No, they, both my parents could speak French. They um, but my grandparents spoke French most of the time in the house. There's only my sister and I out of the nine children that can speak French. So it's because it wasn't spoken in the house, you know?

O: Did your parents attempt to teach the other children to speak French as well?

R: I think they did, but they ... Their French came in handy around Christmastime when they used to keep their secrets. You know, they would talk good to one another in French as to what they were getting us. I used to pick up some of their secrets a little bit. [Chuckles]

O: Did they have a French school like at night?

R: Yes.

O: Did children go?

R: Actually, I went to the St. Marie's School in South Lowell. I was in the fourth grade, as I say, when we moved into the city, but that's what I was attending in the fourth grade in St. Marie's when my father past away. And so I was only in there for about probably about a year I guess in the French School. And they... But then they ah, we moved to the city and then I never went back to a French School. They had a French school at Notre Dame de Lourdes, but instead they sent me to the Franklin School. Yah.

O: So you were interacted mostly with the French children and Irish? Do you remember your first encounter with other ethnic groups other than the French and Irish?

R: Well yah. We used to play the ... it's like I say, you know, in sports. We used to look forward to playing the Greeks from the North Common on Washington Park. Football or baseball, whatever it was you know, and they ah, there was kind of (--) We enjoyed playing with them, but there was still ... On the other hand, there was still a little bit of ...

O: Animosity?

R: Yes, yah.

O: Was that mostly because of what you heard from your parents and older people, or?

R: My parents never did anything, talk differently about the ethnic group. No, no, not that I can remember.

O: It's just because you lived in separate neighborhoods?

R: I think it was mostly because of kids, you know, they were exchanging stories probably, you know? Watch out for the Greeks, they play dirty, and all this sort of thing, you know. So we ah, we just carried that along with us. Yah.

O: Can you just tell me a little bit about the various houses that you lived in?

R: Yah, after we lived there, I don't recall how long we lived in that particular three tenement. Course there is no furnace in there, you know? There was no furnaces in any of those houses. What you had is a regular wood stove in the kitchen. There was no heat upstairs at all in the two top floors, and the only heat that would go up there is by leaving the doors opened, you know,

just let the air go up. So they ah, and then we moved to ah, corner of Crane and Middlesex Street. It was a duplex house, and there was no furnace in there either, you know, but they ah, it was a smaller place to live. It was about six rooms I guess, six or seven rooms in the house and we shared it with another. You know, it was like a duplex, and there was no furnace like I say in the house. So we had to go look for wood and then we'd use the coal at night. We'd go down to the Lowell Coal Company, down here off School Street and buy a bag of coke they would call it. That would help to keep the fires warming at night, because wood would burn too fast. So we'd put the coke in there, you know, heat up that um, heat up the house there. We also had, in addition to the kitchen stove we had a little, like a little pot belly stove in the dining room. And immediately over the stove was a little ventilator that helped heat up the upstairs.

O: So you had how many bedrooms in that house?

R: Let me see, three. Well there was three bedrooms upstairs. Was there three? Yah, three bedrooms upstairs and one, and then we used the corridor where they had a couch in the corridor where my, one or two of my brothers slept there in the corridor.

O: And a dining room, you mentioned there....

R: It had a dining room, and a kitchen, and a front room. We had our piano in the front room.

O: And where did the family spend most of um...?

R: In the ... most of ... in the dining room and the front room.

O: The front room.

R: Because we had a player piano in there, you know? That's where we would all gather, yah.

O: And how long did you live in that house?

R: Ah, until ah, this was around 1938, 1939... probably. I don't really... I was in the Navy when the ah, (O: I see) when my mother was still living in that house. And when I came out of the Navy she had moved and they ah, she was living a couple of blocks down the street, along side of Washington Park in the big tenement house.

O: You mentioned your mother never worked. How was she able to manage?

R: Relief. [Chuckles] Welfare, they call it today. And they ah...

O: Did that have a stigma back then, to be on relief?

R: Oh, well they ah... We just thank God that we had it really. And they ah...when I was able to ah, old enough to get into the Civilian Conservation Corp, what they call C.C.C. Camps, they set me up in Vermont. They would give me five dollars a month and they would send twenty five dollars home for my mother. That would help out. And they...we'd get little jobs wherever we

could you know, working in stores, markets. And sometimes we wouldn't get paid for it, I mean in money, we would get paid in groceries. Say we would probably get five dollars a week in groceries, which was quite a bit, quite a bit of groceries.

O: And um, there were eight children all together you said?

R: Nine.

O: Oh nine.

R: Yes nine.

O: When you were growing up how...what type of activities did you do to socialize? Did you go to dances and thing like that? As again (words unclear] still having your parents.

R: I don't remember going to too many dances. Although I guess I went to some, but at the age of fourteen I began traveling with a carnival. This man came over to the house. He asked my mother if ah, for permission to take me with him to ah... He was a friend of the family and ah, take me up to Vermont and ah, to work at a carnival. He had a concession of little slot machines, penny slot machines, penny. And they... So she said, "Sure, you know, if he wants to go." So I went and that's where I started my working career at that time, you know? The rest of my brothers and sisters continued going to school. I went as far as the ninth grade and then they ah, that was it as far as my schooling went. And then... But I continued working, and they...

O: How long did you work there?

R: Well I didn't work with him very long, because he wasn't paying me and because he wasn't making any money in the... There was just It was just a place where it wasn't very good, you know, where he wasn't making any money himself. And I left him up in Vermont and I came to Lowell. I was in Lowell for about less than half a day when I was hired by the, by a local man here, John F. Carney. And he had several concessions, carnival work again, but it was mostly like a circus carnival after awhile, because we had circus acts with us and I was...

O: Was that permanently in Lowell, or did they travel?

R: Oh they traveled all around. Yah, and they ah, he just hired me to clean out the concessions, but it was a way I was making a few dollars, and my mother was happy about that.

O: How long did you stay with them?

R: I stayed with him for quite awhile until I went into the Navy. I was in the Navy for six years, and I came out and they... I went back to what I liked doing best. The only, really the only thing that I knew and that was the circus carnival. So I worked with the shows for quite awhile just traveling around and working in all sorts of different concessions. You know, doing all sorts of odd jobs and they, and then I got married. And then my wife told me that I had better get me a job where I would you know, be ...

O: You have one place to [unclear].

R: Yes, stay right in Lowell. So I was hired by General Electric. I went to work for General Electric Company.

O: The first time that you worked with the carnivals, was that the first time you were really far from home?

R: Yes, yah, first time.

O: Was it the culture shock in any way?

R: No, no, it didn't bother me, you know, because... We were pretty much on our own, you know, supervised, you know, probably by my mother I thought, but they ah, we kind of helped her along. We knew that she was in need of a lot of help.

O: And um,, going back a little bit to when you were younger and still at home, did your parents socialize mostly with other French Canadians? Did you associate a lot with one particular church?

R: Well the French people all gathered, you know? It was, home was the place to be, you know, to have fun. And they ah, of course there was no television. So we all gathered. On Saturdays, Saturday we would go for our beans. In some places in Lowell they would have a pot of beans. You would make it, not cooked you see, and they'd put a tag on it and you would take it to a bakery, and they would bake it, slow bake the beans. And then Saturday night they would be already for you. They would cook the beans for you, the bakery. And then you go, you'd see all the people that had the beans, having their beans baked. They'd have large pot holders, they would be walking down the street with them, you know, and going home to their homes. They ah... So they did that. And after we had our bean supper on Saturday night, we all had to take a bath at that time. You know, clean up and put on our Sunday best on Saturday nights. It was just a thing everyone did and the ah.... I mentioned taking a bath. It wasn't that we didn't practice proper hygiene here, or personal hygiene, but you had to heat up your water on the stove you know? So heating up the water for a large family like that, it took a long time.

O: [Unclear].

R: So we ah, on Saturday we use to take our bath and dress up like after, and then either go for a walk downtown, and they ah, a whole bunch of us would go downtown and, or else we'd stay home and pull the rugs back. There'd always be someone playing an instrument or two, you know. They we would have little cadrills right in the house. Little French cadrills, dancing. It is called, cadrills is the square dancing, you know?

O: And what about Sundays? Did you ever go to church like with your school?

R: Oh yes, Sunday. Oh yah, we had to go to church on Sunday.

O: Which church was that, that you went to?

R: Notre Dame de Lourdes, yah.

O: It was pretty much a requirement.

R: Oh yes, that was a must. (Laughing) Ya, that was a must.

O: And um, did your mother belong to any kind of associations?

R: Yes, she belonged to the Holy Name Society. She belonged to the organization that the Notre Dame de Lourdes had at that time. It was the, I don't recall the name of it now, but it is like a guard organization, where the women all get together like an auxiliary. Yah. So she enjoyed that because it gave her a chance to get out and socialize.

O: And you mentioned you only went up to the ninth grade?

R: Yes.

O: Um, was that a disappointment for your mother, or did she want her children to, you know, go further than that or...?

R: She encouraged them to continue school. Oh yah. They ah, most of them from the family graduated from high school and they... I was one of the very few that didn't.

O: Did you find that in general that was something that your parents really wanted from their children?

R: No it wasn't. She, like I say, she encouraged us to continue school and everything, you know, encouraged the others to continue school, but no, she didn't say I want you to be a doctor or you know, do the best you can.

O: And um, so you went into, being around fourteen, you went to the... ?

R: I traveled with the shows, yah.

O: You went into the Navy you mentioned?

R: Well, when I was seventeen I went into the Civilian Conservation Corps. And then when I was, I was only in there for one year, from September 1938 to September 1939. Came out, and things were rough in Lowell. Things were bad because there was no employment around.

O: You grew up during the depression actually?

R: Yah, and I suppose there was some kids working around setting pins you know, in the bowling alleys and things like that you know. I worked for what they called the N.Y.A. National Youth Administrator, but you're only limited to so many hours a month, because they had to accomodate so many kids I guess. So they, like I say, you're only allowed probably around twenty five or thirty hours a month. They'd put you in the back of a truck and send you up to Fort Devens to work in a warehouse, or whatever, you know. Then I get a...nineteen I joined the Navy, and was in there for six years.

O: Was that pretty much because economy was bad in Lowell and that was something, that was a job, it was like....

R: There is kind of a little story to that to, about joining the Navy, because I was just on Branch Street there near the fire house, and just kind of like "Crazy Gookenheim" used to say, "minding my own business" you know, doing nothing, just hanging around the store there. And these two fellows decided they were going to go down to the recruiting office. And so they, friends of mine, you know. So they asked me if I would go down with them. I said, "I don't want to go down no recruiting office." And they says, "Come on, keep us company anyway." So I went down. Well as it was, them two fellows were rejected and I was accepted. So one because of his, he had infantile paralysis in his right arm; and the other one because he had bad teeth. And so they were both turned down, but I was asked to remain behind. And so I...and then when I went home and told my mother that a Chief Petty Officer from the Navy was coming to see her about getting her permission for me to go into the Navy, she couldn't believe it.

O: Did she like the idea?

R: No, she really didn't.

O: She didn't like it?

R: No, she didn't like it. Because she knew that, well there was a war going on in Europe, and so we knew eventually that it would, we would become involved you know, in it. The way things were going, a lot of unrest all over the world, you know. So I don't know if that had anything to do with it or not, but she, she finally, well the Chief talked her into signing the paper and I went in.

O: And where were you stationed?

R: I was stationed aboard a battleship for a very short time, the Arkansas. And then I went aboard the Sumner, and we went down to South America after my basic training for about eleven months or so, ten, eleven months. We came back and went through the Panama Canal along to Hawaii. And I was at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese bombed. We were very fortunate you know. My ship was very fortunate that they came out of it, because they... I happened to be up that particular morning and I saw the planes coming over. It didn't register to me that the red ball in the plane, you know, and the red ball on the wing was Japanese plane, but they were strafing the dock, and they were going right by the ship. My ship, I was tied up at the submarine base there in Hawaii, on Wahoo Island. And they came right by and they were strafing, and they were

heading right for the battleships and everything, you know. So I said, I couldn't believe it, you know. And even though we had been shown silhouettes of Japanese planes, and the German planes, all the time we were down in South America, because they knew war was inevitable and, but they didn't know, you know, who was going to do what. So we were kind of preparing ourselves. The Captain was preparing us, the captain of the ship, by showing us silhouettes of the planes, you know, and having us go to general quarters every morning and every evening. And so when they, when the Japanese did strike at Pearl Harbor we were out of ammunition, you know, after the first I don't know, ten minutes or so; ten minutes, fifteen minutes of firing. So we had to get somebody to open up our magazine [unclear] so we could resume firing. But I stayed on that ship for about thirty eight months going to some thirty nine islands in the Pacific, on Australia, and oh all around the Pacific. Then finally they...

O: That was your fear of the first time being [unclear] that was the first time you left the United States?

R: Yes, yah.

O: And ah... Okay, will you just tell me a little bit about what you know about how your parents grew up, and what differences you saw between how they grew up and how you grew up?

R: Well only from what my mother told me, you know? My father had a wholesale candy business back in the twenties, and they ah, but he kept working part time jobs, you know, doing all kinds of jobs. He was a real hard worker. So they were able to, to get themselves this house, you know, buy this house in 1928, which they only actually had for three years, you know. But they...he was a hard worker, but they were happy, happy people, and they took us all around with them, you know. For example, like on Sundays they would take us to ah, he would throw us, put us in the back of the truck and take us to a lake. And it was for swimming, you know, and we'd go on picnics. We'd go on outings from the Boston and Maine Railroads, the grand outings in those days up in Manchester, New Hampshire, Pine Island Park. So we did alot of things as a family you know, and it carried after he died. Like we all stuck together pretty much.

O: Were your grandparents, well did you know your grandparents? Were they alive?

R: I only remember one. The other one had past away by the time...I didn't get to know him. My mother's father and mother, I didn't get to know them at all. But my other, my father's mother and father I got to know pretty well, and we visited them. It was, we found that it was really nice to go visit them particularly around the holidays, and then we had them over for Christmas.

O: Did they live in Lowell?

R: Yes, they lived in Lowell, yah.

O: And aside from having a generation difference between your grandparents and yourself, were they happy as to how things have gone for their children, you know, your parents?

R: As far as I know, they ah, I don't know to be honest with you.

O: You don't really no?

R: No, I don't really know.

O: How old were you when they [unclear]?

R: Around ten years old you know. And then after my father died, we just lost contact of almost every one of the relatives it seems. I don't know why it was, but they, it just, they didn't seem to...on his side particularly. My mother's side, we got to see, you know, we were seeing the relatives quite often. And they came over and we visited.

O: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the depression and what you remember?

R: Well it was really bad. You know, I'd come home from school I can remember, and you would tell that to some people and they just don't believe it. But I would come home from school and get a slice of bread and put it under water, moisten it a little bit and then put a little sugar on it. Then sometimes I'd have just one slice of bread and that would be my dinner. I remember on one occasion at the Lincoln School, when I went to the Lincoln School, the teacher kept me after school. And I forgot what grade I was in, probably the fifth grade I think, fifth... It only went up to about the sixth. She kept me after school and I wondered why she did that, cause I hadn't done anything bad, or anything wrong. And so I said, "Why did you keep me after school?" She says, "I have something for you." She seemed like a very elderly teacher at that time, you know, gray hair and everything, you know, Miss Owens. And they ah... She says, "I bought you a pair of rubbers. I noticed that your sneakers were all wet when you came in." That's when you could buy sneakers for sixty-nine cents at that time. And my mother use to say, and we use to kid her, "I want, I just bought you these sneakers I want them to last you six months now."

Side I ends.
Side II begins

R: Continuing on with the hard times, I remember working for this man, John Carney. And he use to run bingos here in the City of Lowell down at the Memorial Auditorium, and the ... for the East End Club here in Lowell. My job was to provide cards, keep providing cards when they were at the door, when the people were coming in. I remember they did a lot of good things, the East End Club, and I remember they made our Christmas. I don't know what they [unclear] about, but John F. Carney, who was the owner of the bingo equipment and everything, and ran for the East End Club, would get several Christmas baskets from the East End. He would see that we got one every year, every Christmas. And that was really, they had a turkey in there. They had apples and oranges, and vegetables. That was a Godsend. And I remember a couple of times when I brought one home, or and John would, Carney would bring one up to the house and give it to my mother. She would start crying, you know?

O: Yah, [unclear]. What else do you remember that really sticks in your mind about you know, growing up during the depression?

R: Everything was terribly cheap, but we didn't have the money, you know? I remember doing an errand for a lady, an Indian lady on Grand Street. That if I went up on Sunday mornings, I used to look forward to that every morning, Sunday morning... I forgot exactly how old I was, probably about eleven, twelve or something, and I would, she would give me fifty cents and I would go up and get her a bottle of, a half of pint of moonshine that was made right here in the city of Lowell, see, in the bathtub. They made it in the bathtub. And they ah... Sunday morning she would ask me to go up and get her a half pint. She would give me ten cents for going up there. And the ten cents would allow me to go into just about any theater in the city, you know, well not any theater, but the Crown Theater, or Realto Theater, or one of those. And I would be in the theater for four hours, you know. So that was ...

O: Speaking about the moonshine, did just about everybody make moonshine?

R: Oh, well I don't know. I just knew of that one place. I know that my father used to make home brew. He had a couple of explosions, you know. This was out in South Lowell, when he was doing it out there. I imagine quite a few made their own beer. Yes, yah, their home brew. As far as the moonshine, I don't know. I just know of that one place that I used to go to all of the time to get a half of pint, or a pint bottle.

O: This was Indian?

R: She was an Indian lady, but actually she was the mother of a friend of mine that I chummed around with for quite awhile, but she would never ask him to go, you know, the boys to go after it.

O: And why was that?

R: I don't know why she never ... Her husband worked in the New Market Silk Mills here in the city, you know, and he worked all his life. They just enjoyed that bottle, that half, that pint of it was actually a pint of whiskey, a pint of booze that they ah, I used to get for them, yah.

O: Did you ever have anything to do with the mills?

R: The mills? Yah, I had one experience with the mills. At the age of fifteen, you could take your working papers out at fifteen you know, at the age fifteen. And my mother found me a job in the, I think it was right in this building right here. So she, I was playing baseball at the time down in Washington Park, and she called me over. She says, "I found you a job, hurry down there, they're waiting for you." So I went down to the mills. I don't think I really hurried, but I came down anyway. And when I walked into the mills and that noise, and the odor in the mills, you know, just gave me a negative feeling about going to work in this place. And they ah, and anyway I went over to the boss and I said, "My name is Roland Larochelle and I was asked to come down here." "Oh, I'm glad to see you he says. This is what I want you to do." And he handed me a pail of oil and a brush. And he says, I want you to go into this machine and it

looked like a loom of some sort. It was going whickity whackity and making all kinds of noises and putting out this material, you know? Weaving this material like. And so he says, "I want you to take the lint out, keep the lint off from underneath the machine. Keep it clean, nice and clean underneath there." So I says to myself, "No way." You know, I don't even know exactly what I said, but it was, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to do it, see. And so I said, "You'll have to have to show me how to do it sir." He says, "Oh alright." So he got underneath there and he started to show me how to do it. I called him, and I kept calling him. The noise in there was terrible. I had to yell. I said, "Sir, and finally I got his attention." He says, "What do you want?" I said, "I got to go to the toilet." He says, "Well hurry up back." Didn't even know me and he was mad at me already. So I just went right out the door and up to the baseball field again, see. And so my mother says to me as she's coming back the other way you know from home, she says...she spots me down there playing baseball and she called me over. She says, "I thought I got you a job?" So I lied to her. I said, "I'm sorry mom, I went down there but the job was already taken, someone had gotten before me." Oh, she says, you're going to have to find something else. You just can't be playing baseball all the time, you know? She was really upset that day.

O: Did she ever find out that you lied to her?

R: No, I don't think so. If she did, she kept it a secret. But it bothered me you know, because I lied to her of course, but I felt a lot better not...

O: Did you ever have any kind of other jobs in the mills or ... ?

R: Well working for General Electric. I was a wire maker there, but I was being layed off so often, that, because of lack of material. That they were just starting out here more or less in Lowell, you know? So friends of mine use to say, "Why don't you take a civil service test and work up in the ... for the civil service and they won't be laying you off, you know, you'll have a steady job? I said, "Where?" Up in Bedford Hospital?" I said, "Oh gee, working up there? Nothing doing." "Come on, all your friends are up there," you know. So it meant workers I guess. So anyway I took a civil service test and I passed. And I was called up there. And I worked up there and I just retired in 1979 after, well counting my service time in the service, is thirty four years.

O: Wow! And what did you do there?

R: I did everything. Worked there as a, in the operating room, as a operating room scrub nurse. Worked in the, all phases of that hospital including, in charge of the shock room, everything that you could think of. Working with the geriatrics, with the surgical, with the maximum security, everything. Came out a License Practical Nurse. So my daughter is a registered nurse now too, also.

O: Is that when she got the interest?

R: Probably, yah probably. But they ah ... I enjoyed working up there. It was tough. I would never want to do it again, but I'm glad that I did now, you know?

O: How long did you work there?

R: Over twenty eight years, yah. After I got out of there and retired in 1979, I came down to the Boott Mills and got a job down here working for Locks and Canals. And I enjoyed it to no end down there, because even though when I was growing up the canals were there, but they were only there for one reason, the canals, and that was for swimming. And so I didn't no really what their purpose was. Evidently I never had any interest in finding out what, what their interest, what their purpose was, but we used it as a swimming hole. Our favorite swimming hole underneath School Street Bridge, or from Walker Street down to School Street Bridge. And so then going to work down here I had learned that they had much more important functions then.

O: What exactly did you do there?

R: I was a gateman down here for the Locks and Canal, down at the Boott Mill.

O: So your last job was working at the hospital. Then you worked for the Locks and... ?

R: Well I retired in 1979 from the hospital. I came down and applied for the job. I knew that there was going to be an opening. Someone had told me there was going to be an opening down here at the Boott Mills. I went down, and I was interviewed for the job and the ah, I was hired for it as a gateman. That was the title of the job, but the job is primarily parking cars for the tenants. There were some twenty-seven tenants down in the Boott Mills at the time. So my responsibility was to see that they all had their own parking spaces, and no one else was taking them. My other responsibility was to go through all the buildings and see that the temperature was proper, good temperature there, particularly in the winter time, and see about broken windows or you know, any damage. It was kind of like a fire watch. **[Tape turned off, then on again]** Well we ah, as I said, I was working down at the Boott Mills, and I particularly liked the job down there, because they ah, I like history. I like the history of Lowell. I know how it was, you know, in the earlier days. And it was like really a dying city, it really was. It seemed like every time you came downtown, there was another place closing up, a theater being torn down, or a building being torn down and that bothered me to see the Dutton Apartments for example, being torn down, because my mother-in-law lived there and I visited her there. I thought they were very nice. I thought they were good strong buildings. It seemed a shame that these were being torn down really. It seemed like a lot of places were being torn down for one or two things, either a bank or a filling station, you know? It didn't seem like it was worth tearing down these beautiful buildings. I had no knowledge that they were going to do something with them eventually, you know, but they were just too good to be torn down anyway, you know? Anyway, working down at the Boott Mills gave me an opportunity of going all through the mills. And sometimes my employer would wonder where I was, especially if they asked me to take a group and show them the bell tower, or the clock up on top of the Boott Mill Tower, which I love going up there. I must have gone up there a trillion times while working there. I use to take extra time going other places in the mill, you know, and trying to see things I had never seen before in my life, you know, the mills. The way these mills were made, particularly building six, beautiful brick building, brick work under the building, archways and what have you. Something alot of

people don't see in this city, probably will never see, but I enjoyed that. And I enjoyed working down there very much, and meeting people, taking them all around.

O: You had groups of people you mentioned that came?

R: Oh yes. It would be a group of school teachers from Bridgewater State College, would want to go up to there tower. And they took my picture while I was ringing the bell. Certainly I asked the President of the Boott Mill, Mel Lesburg, if I could join the other bell ringers in the city during the time the hostages were in Iran. We were all ringing the bell for five minutes at noontime. And he said, "Yes, if you want to ring it, go ahead." So I went up to...ringing that bell for five minutes you have to be in condition. And they, I'm telling you it is really a hard task to do. It is really a hard thing to do to ring that bell for five minutes, because you have to get the timing and everything, you know? But I enjoyed ringing it anyway, even though I was really tired. But they ah, it was a very interesting job down there. I only worked down there for four years and four months, but I got to meet alot of people. They thought for awhile that I was working for National Park I think, but I did take the National Park people up there to ring the bell for them so they could record it. They wanted it to record. So that was interesting. I can't think of anything I can add to it today. I just wanted more time for myself, you know? That is why I left while I was still feeling good.

O: We are going to go back a little bit, and I would like you to tell me about how you met your wife?

R: Yah, okay now. Well my wife came from Centraville, and her Uncle lived in the same neighborhood as I lived in, around the Notre Dame de Lourdes Parish off of Branch Street. He owned a variety store from the corner of Queen and Branch Street. So she worked for him. I saw this little girl working in the variety store. And I just found reasons to go up there a little bit more than ...

O: This was after you got out of the Navy?

R: No, I was in the Navy.

O: Oh I see, you were visiting.

R: Visiting, right, and asked her if she would write to me, you know, if I wrote to here, you know. And she said that she would answer me, answer my letters. So, as a matter of fact, she was writing a letter to me at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. So she said she was all shook up, you know, at that particular time, you know? So, but she, she has, she mentioned that a couple of times to me, but we kept writing to one another. And when we'd come home on furlough, which was, I think I was, I think I only had two furloughs during the whole war, but I would spend all of those thirty days with her and everything, you know? So we would go places together, dances.

O: Were your parents, well your mother, was she happy that she was French Canadian? Did it matter to her?

R: No, but they ah, she knew that eventually... I had an allotment going, especially the latter part when she found out we were getting married, you know? After awhile, I had a allotment going home from the Navy, and she knew that it would be coming to an end, you know, once I got married. I don't think she liked that too, too well, you know. No, she liked, she liked my wife. She liked the girl I was going to marry, yah.

O: It was more important to her, you know, as a person. Well would she have felt the same way if the girl you were going to marry was Portuguese or...?

R: My mother? No, that didn't bother... (O: It didn't matter? It didn't matter to her?) No, no, she wasn't one of them that said, you know, "You're French, I want you to go with a French girl." I know that the history in the mills, there was the French girls probably would become attracted to a Greek boy, or whatever, you know? It was uncalled. You know, I mean it was, they didn't like it. The parents didn't like it. I had no problem with the children, you know, but they...

O: Remember you talked about your wife's parents before, that they spoke French at home and even though they were both from Lowell...

R: Yah, my mother could stay right with them as far as speaking French is concerned. Stay right with anyone as a matter of fact, and she spoke quite a bit, you know? Talked with my wife's parents, you know. And she lost her dad also, you know. He wasn't as young as mine was, but they, while I was overseas. But no, there was no problem there as far as who was speaking French and who wasn't, or...

O: I noticed that it was unusual that even though her parents had been born here, they did speak French at home.

R: Right.

O: Did you find that unusual, or was it something common?

R: Well I think it... My grandparents didn't speak that much French either, you know. So I think that had something to do... Whereas her grandparents spoke nothing but French, like her grandparents, and then her great grandparents, they were the same way. You know, they all came from Canada, you know, and they all ... Her aunts and uncles all spoke French. They were...whereas in my, on my side they didn't do that, you know. They spoke mostly all English, even though they were all, you know, French.

O: Which was more common among the French Canadians?

R: Well where my wife was living in the Centralville part of the city, where they were speaking mostly all French over there, that where I was living they spoke mostly all English.

O: So in other words it would have been more important to her parents, do you think, for her to stay within the French community?

R: Excuse me, I didn't hear?

O: So as I said, I had asked if they would have been upset if their daughter had married a non-French, and do you think they would have too?

R: I think so, because she had one brother and one sister, and they went French, you know, all they way. But I don't think it would have made any difference in my, because I know it wouldn't have made any difference, because my, I have two sister-in-laws that are Polish. So with my mother, you know, as long as they loved one another, that was all that mattered, you know?

O: And how many children do you have?

R: I have five.

O: Five!

R: I have three girls and two boys, yah.

P: You had mentioned earlier that you didn't teach them French or anything, now they regret?

R: They regret now. We tried to, you know, we did make an effort to teach them French when they were young, teach them, you know, one or two words like, you know. And they would say, "We don't want to learn that French. What do we want that French for, learn how to speak French for?" Now they say, "You should have taught us, because we could use, you know. we would like to know." When my wife and I speak French they don't have the faintest idea what we are talking about, you know, they may... My youngest girl, she seems to understand a word or two and I don't think it would be very difficult for her to pick it up.

O: I guess we can sort of wrap this up a little bit. Do you have anything especially you want to add that I haven't covered?

R: I would say that those days are a lot happier than they are today, I think.

O: You mean for yourself [unclear]?

F: Yah, even though there wasn't any money you know, we weren't...you know, we couldn't get the things we really wanted in life, all the things that we wanted in life, but we had one another. We had family together. Today when we go visit a relative, they'll say, "Well can you wait until this program is over?" See, and that kind of takes the enthusiasm of conversation out, you know? But we had fun when we were growing up. We really had hard times, but we had fun.

O: Looking back now, what changes have you seen in Lowell that really stand in your mind?

R: It seems as though that the.... Like I say, Lowell had all these beautiful theaters and everything, you know, and beautiful buildings. And they ah, and suddenly the urban renewal period was upon us. It is like it really got out of hand, you know. And obviously it wasn't good for the city, because the population went down and the city looked like it was just a dying city. You know, and nobody had anymore, seemed to have any interest in it. Now it just seems like it's come back to life, and that's a....The population is growing again, and the people want to come to Lowell, because they feel it's, you know, it's worth coming in here and seeing all these changes. I think they're very curious to see how it is all going to (O: Work out) work out, yah. There's no doubt in their minds that it is going to work out.

End of interview

jw